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FM AMEMBASSY LILONGWE

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TAGS: PREL IR MI

SUBJECT: MALAWI TO OPEN EMBASSY IN IRAN

REF: 07 LILONGWE 856

Classified By: DCM Kevin Sullivan for Reasons 1.4(b),(d)

¶1. (C) Summary: During a mid-April visit to Tehran, Foreign Minister Joyce Banda announced that the GOM will open an embassy in Iran to strengthen bilateral ties between the two countries, contradicting her previous statements in private to the Ambassador. Deputy Foreign Minister Henri Mumba publicly confirmed the plan to open an embassy, but discounted Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) reports that President Mutharika would make a state visit to Iran. IRNA had also reported that Banda stated publicly in Tehran that all propaganda campaigns against Iran were fabricated, and that she personally had realized that existing realities in the country differed from anti-Iran propaganda; Mumba could not confirm her exact quotes. The GOM maintains it will primarily cooperate on agricultural, medical, and energy projects. Comment: Malawi continues to seek foreign assistance from all available sources, but recent trends – discarding Taiwan for China, talks with Cuba about investment in the Shire-Zambezi waterway, and the strengthening of relations with Iran – are a bit worrisome. As Mutharika approaches a contentious May 2009 election, he seems to be seeking out new contributors who might be less critical of government diversion of funds for partisan ends or other irregularities. End Summary.

¶2. (C) During her current visit to Iran, Foreign Minister Joyce Banda announced that the government of Malawi will open an embassy in Tehran. This contradicted Banda's previous assurances to the Ambassador that the GOM was only interested in increased aid flows from Iran and had no plans to establish resident relations (reftel). Deputy Foreign Minister Henri Mumba confirmed the plan to open an embassy in Tehran to the press, but he discounted IRNA reports that President Mutharika would visit Iran, saying that the MFA was not aware of any planned trips. (Comment: The MFA is often unaware of Mutharika's plans, so this denial means little. End Comment.) Malawi has maintained relations with Iran since the 1970s but has never established resident ties.

¶3. (C) IRNA also stated that FM Banda had criticized Western "propaganda campaigns" against Iran, and she claimed that she now realized that existing realities in the country differed from anti-Iran propaganda. Emboff sought confirmation of these public remarks from Mumba, but the Deputy Foreign Minister did not return phone calls. In press reports, the GOM has maintained it will seek to increase cooperation primarily in agricultural, medical, and energy projects.

¶4. (C) Comment: Malawi continues to seek foreign assistance

from all available sources, but the rhetoric attributed to FM Banda, if true, is a slap against Malawi's western donors. The MFA has been unresponsive to recent demarches concerning UN Security Council Resolutions on Iran, perhaps because of this impending development. At the same time, Malawi's recent foreign initiatives including its recognition of mainland China, discussions with Cuba about investment in the Shire-Zambezi waterway, a visit last year by a Venezuelan delegation, and this announcement in Iran represent a new and somewhat adventurous trend by the hitherto-cautious Malawians, justified in its entirety by aid funding. Mutharika has clearly embarked on a financially-motivated policy path, perhaps wishing to expand the donor base by seeking out new aid contributors who would be less conditionality-minded and less critical of financial pecadillos in government here. We doubt any combination of such non-traditional donors would be able to match the contributions we and our European colleagues make to Malawi's well-being and development, and in the end these new foreign entanglements may wind up costing Malawi some of the little flexibility it has in foreign affairs. End Comment.

EASTHAM